The Episcopal Diocese of California

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Pastoral Letter

From: The Bishop of California

To: The Diocese of California

Concerning: The Common Cup during the AIDS Crisis

At some critical moments in history when epidemics have ravaged various lands, diocesan bishops have sent out "Directives" concerning use of the common cup at communion. If the facts were clear that a disease was being spread through the people's sharing of the common cup, a bishop would order a directive prohibiting the use of the common cup. In such situations the bishop might reiterate that a full and valid communion is made by eating only the bread, therefore the cup might be omitted. Or a bishop might encourage "intinction" whereby the bread is dipped into the cup as opposed to drinking from the cup.

Today we are faced with the AIDS epidemic, and the Church must look squarely at two facts. One--that the AIDS virus has been found in saliva. Two--that in no situation has a case of AIDS been traced to saliva. The Church is aware, on the one hand, that AIDS is not transmitted through the common cup, and, on the other hand, that many people are uneasy about saliva and the common cup.

Because there is no evidence that AIDS is transmitted through the common cup I refuse to issue a "Directive" to this Diocese calling for a uniform and precautionary prohibition of the common cup. Instead I want to issue a "Pastoral Letter." I want to call upon the pastoral and best instincts of all heterosexual and homosexual relations of God's family at this time of the epidemic.

I beg your pastoral understanding for the AIDS patient who declines to use the common cup because he or she is afraid of contacting a harmful bacteria that might devastate a system devoid of immune powers.

I beg your pastoral understanding for the cautious person who now only receives the bread.

And I call upon the family not to heighten divisions by making the common cup a political issue. Please keep it as a pastoral issue. Already we have increased situations of people staying away from our Lord's table for one reason or another. None of those reasons need to prosper. Instead we need to gather around the altar of our one Lord. Let us drink deeply of the compassion of our Lord and offer understanding to all of our brothers and sisters, heterosexual and homosexual, as we gather to break the bread.

As for me, I intend, when I celebrate, to eat the bread at the beginning of the holy meal, and at the end after everyone has drunk from the chalice, I intend to receive from the cup. Furthermore I will continue to be diligent in keeping up with medical evidence concerning the common cup in case that the time ever comes when I should need to issue a directive. Meanwhile I ask you in the mercy of our Lord to translate this pastoral letter into pastoral living.

God bless you.

+ William E. Swing